

(From "Times-Dispatch" of January 15, 1911.)

If Lee Could Have Stood at the Helm

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**The Retrospect of a Confederate—If Slavery
Had Been Abandoned by the South—
Confederates were Overconfident—
Like Israelites at Kadesh.**

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Looking back now to the summer of 1863, with Gettysburg lost and Lee back in Virginia, I see so plainly what we Confederates ought to have done, that I wonder much we did not do it. But hindsights are proverbially much clearer than foresights. I think General Lee must have felt sure that, handicapped as we were by slavery, we could not hope for sympathy and help from Europe, and that without one or both of these we could not win our independence. And there must have been others, perhaps many, of those in authority, who saw this, or should have seen it —just as it was plain to Washington at Valley Forge that the colonies could not resist the power of Great Britain without aid from France. Had General Lee said to Mr. Davis and Congress: "Gentlemen, I have done my best; it is plain that we must have sympathy and recognition, if not assistance, from Europe. We can get these only by legislation on the part of Congress, followed by action of the several States, looking to gradual emancipation, to be completed in a definite term, say fifty years, or one or two generations. Shall we hold on to slavery, as if we were fighting for that, and lose the right of self-government? The institution of slavery was in large measure forced upon us, and we have made the best of it; but it is an evil, and should be abolish-

ed. Shall we keep the matter in our own hands, and, dealing with it slowly and wisely, get rid of it gradually, and in the way least hurtful to both races? Or shall we continue this bloody and hopeless struggle, and finally have our conquerors, Lincoln and the Republican party, settle it for us, and carry out *their* plan of emancipation as *they* think best?

“Surely, if we are wise, we will take such steps as will make all Christendom believe that we really intend to emancipate the negro, just as fast as is consistent with the best interests of both races.

“The result is sure. Recognition (and help, if we need it) will come speedily from one or more of the European powers. France has shown a readiness to recognize the Confederate States of America, if England will, and many in England already sympathize with us, and her business interests would be greatly helped by the establishment of the Confederate States of America. Nothing but antipathy to slavery has prevented our recognition thus far. What we may think of slavery as a blessing or a curse is entirely beside the question now. Many of the wisest among us agree with me in thinking it an evil; but however that may be, the Christian nations are of one mind, that it must go. We must recognize this important fact, and let slavery go, while we may and can let it go, with least harm to all concerned. Everything that can with honor be given up must be given up to win that greatest of all political blessings, the right to govern ourselves, for which we have already suffered so much. Let us not forfeit this blessing by clinging to so doubtful a good as slavery, which we must give up in any event; for even if we could win our independence without help, slavery is doomed, and cannot and ought not to survive longer than a reasonably safe way can be found to dispose of it. Do not doubt but that wisdom enough is among us to find a way for it to pass safely. Statesmanship of a high order has never been wanting in the South. God will bless such an effort, and give us a Moses to lead us through and out of this wilderness.”

We who know what weight and influence General Lee had in the South in those days cannot doubt for a moment what soldiers and citizens would have done after such a declaration from him. Practically all would have assented, and our success would have been assured. General Lee’s name and fame even then were world-wide, and would have been a sufficient guaranty of the accomplishment of what was proposed by him, and accepted by his people. And he, too, was manifestly the Moses to lead us out of the wilderness of our dangers into the Promised Land of liberty—a Moses, too, who, in many things like the great prophet-leader of Israel, “choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season,” yet, unlike him, would never have hesitated, once the path of duty was made clear to him.

Naturally some who do not know General Lee as we of the older generation do, may ask why he did not come forward with some such proposition. We who do know the entire absence of ambition in our great leader, his entire effacement of self, complete self-abnegation, see clearly why he did not, and could not, being what he was, put himself forward in that way. The man who declined General Scott's offer of the chief command of the Union army, and took an inferior place on the weaker side, influenced solely by duty; the man who told his son (as Captain Robert Lee writes in his book) not to seek promotion, and yet not to refuse it, when offered, could never have taken it upon himself to be an unsought adviser of Mr. Davis and Congress. There seemed an utter lack in General Lee of that "last infirmity of noble minds;"

"The spur that the clear spirit doth raise,
To scorn delights and live laborious days."

Duty alone guided him to do all this and much more. Why, then, one may well ask, was not his counsel sought by the government and his people? We may be sure it would have been given promptly and freely, and to the effect above stated. Alas! why not? There lies the cause of our failure to win the fight. We were over-confident; thought we could win against any odds. I am sure we were not fighting for slavery; just as our forefathers were not fighting against a tribute of "3 pence on every pound of tea," but for a great principle. And had we won the right of self-government, we should soon have been found yielding to world-wide public opinion in gradual emancipation, being no longer under the dictation and abuse of Northern fanatics. But "pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" Sorry I am to admit it, but our fall seems to have come that way.

There was a way opened to us by God to win success by giving up a thing, which we must in any event have given up ere long, and we unwisely and wilfully clung to it. Lincoln declared he was willing to keep or abolish slavery, if only he could force the seceded States back into the Union. We should have been willing to give it up to save ourselves from a union in which we could have no rights, except what our conquerors should allow us.

We, the people of the States of the Confederacy, were to blame for this, not our political leaders only. I, who was then only a youthful private in the ranks, must bear my share of it. I am sure I never thought of it, and never heard any one speak of such a course as proper and right and necessary for success. Lincoln with his usual astuteness saw the need of getting the sympathy of the outside world for his policy of coercion, and issued his proclamation of emancipation, caring nothing for the negro*; but he saw clearly that he must have the sympathy of the outside world, or fail in his efforts to re-form the Union by

torce. How easily might we have taken the wind out of his sails, and made his proclamation waste paper !

This conviction—viz.: that God was leading us to success, having given us great generals (two at least, among the greatest in the world), armies worthy of such leaders, and many other tokens of His favor; but denied it to us, when He saw that we would have it *our way* and not *His*—has been a comfort to my Christian faith, which failed for a time to see how He could suffer so good a cause, championed by such good men, to be overcome by those who had even less of right and justice on their side than the British in 1776.

Have we of Virginia and the South learned our lesson, the lesson God has been teaching us for nearly two generations? This writer trusts so, and hopes that their subject condition for so long has made them at least more ready to accept His guidance in affairs of state, and therefore more competent to exercise due influence in the nation (or Federal Union, as we would rather call it), which has been controlled and dominated so long by a sectional party, raised up by God, and allowed to use so cruel a mode of emancipation, only because those who could and should have done away with slavery in the best manner, missed their opportunity, like the Israelites at Kadesh, in sight of the Promised Land; who must needs enter Canaan in their own way, and meet with disastrous defeat, and more than forty years wandering in the wilderness.

Staunton, Va., December 26, 1911.

*NOTE:—As Gen. Don Piatt, an ardent admirer of Lincoln, testifies in his "Reminiscences of Lincoln, etc." (p. 480,) (Gen. Piatt is describing a conference that he and Gen. Schenck had with Lincoln in Springfield, just after his first nomination for the presidency). "I soon discerned that this strange and strangely gifted man, while not at all cynical, was a sceptic; his view of human nature was low . . . expressing no sympathy for the slave, he laughed at the Abolitionists as a disturbing element easily controlled, without showing any dislike to the slave-holders." (Mrs Lincoln was present, and Gen. Piatt adds: "One of Mrs. Lincoln's interjected remarks was, 'the country will find how we regard that Abolition sneak, Seward'"). We were not at a loss to get at the fact, and the reason for it, in the man before us. Descended from the poor whites of a slave State, through many generations, he inherited the contempt, if not the hatred, held by that class for the negroes. A self-made man . . . his strong nature was built on what he inherited, and he could no more feel a sympathy for that wretched race (negro) than he could for the horse he worked, or the hog he killed." So Rhodes says (in his "History of the U. S., Vol. II, p. 325,) "Lincoln was not, however, in any sense of the word, an Abolitionist," and also (in Vol. IV, p. 64, note) gives the testimony of Gen. Wadsworth, (who was in daily communication, frequently for 5 or 6 hours, with the President and Secretary Stanton,) as follows: "We never heard him (Lincoln) speak of anti-slavery men otherwise than as 'radicals', 'abolitionists,' and of the 'nigger question' he frequently spoke."